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SUBJECT: TAJIK ELECTIONS: RULING PARTY LEADER PRAISES PRESIDENT

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Newly appointed Deputy Chairman of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT), Safar Safarov, told Ambassador Gross that his party is ready for February 28 parliamentary polls and pledged to run a fair campaign. Safarov is "ready for debates" but set conditions that participants do not use "censorable language." Safarov said the Tajik people were united behind President Rahmon, Chairman of the PDPT, and would vote en masse because of their confidence in the President's leadership. The PDPT nominated high-profile government officials to run in single-mandate districts and is poised to maintain its super-majority. END SUMMART

12. (SBU) In a January 23 meeting, PDPT First Deputy Chairman Safarov said the party supported Party Chairman President Rahmon's pledge to conduct free and fair elections and promised that there would be "no violations committed by the President's party." Safarov said the President told him to "Do everything so that, after the elections, people will continue to look at us in the same light. We hope that the people understand us, believe in us, and have faith in the elections." The PDPT holds 47 of 63 seats in the Majlisi Namoyandagon, the lower house of parliament. (Pro-PDPT independent MPs hold additional seats.) International and local political observers expect that they will maintain their large majority in parliament.

13. (SBU) Safarov is focused on electing "professionals" to the 2010 parliament. "As the President said, the parliament is not to be a gathering of collective farmers. Considering the quality make-up of our candidates, I can say that our candidates should make it through the difficult test of elections." The PDPT has nominated many high-ranking officials and powerful local officials to compete in individual mandate races. The Minister of Labor will be the PDPT candidate for an electoral district that includes the entire Rasht Valley, an opposition stronghold during the Civil War. Other PDPT candidates include the First Deputy Minister of Justice, former First Deputy Prosecutor General, former Chairman of Tursunzoda District, Sughd Province First Deputy Governor, and the Kulob City Prosecutor.

14. (SBU) To conduct its campaign, the PDPT will use its party newspaper and local organizations to gather voters and educate them on their party platform. "We won't use state resources. We will try, ourselves, to reach every voter." Safarov and PDPT Propaganda Chief Saliyev estimated that voter turnout would be the same as in 2005, which they said was 97%. (Official turnout was in fact 78%, though the actual turnout was likely much

lower). "The people are going to elections bravely. Here the people believe in the President and will vote." District Administrators were charged to "ensure voter turnout."

15. (SBU) Safarov called the Social Democrats and Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) the PDPT's main opposition. "Our opponents are not simpletons. They are running active campaigns. So we must work to meet with voters." He noted that he has a "good relationship" with IRPT Chairman Kabiri. "We have no quarrels. He even supported a law I proposed!" Safarov said the party was "ready for debates, be they in public squares or on television. But we ask that our opponents to have polite debates, not throw bricks and say censorable things. If it is to be that kind of debate, we will not participate. And we have some of those types of opponents."

16. (SBU) Complex election procedures were the main challenge to successful elections since many voters would have to interpret multiple ballots for local, regional, and national races. Safarov praised the work of USAID-implementer IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems) for its work educating voters. He rebuffed criticism that the PDPT rejected amendments to an election law that would improve transparency, saying that the law had not been ready for consideration. "Our election law is relatively new, from 1998. Of course, nothing remains the same and there will be changes to the election law in the future."

17. (SBU) On Roghun, Safarov claimed that "the people understand that without Roghun, life will be difficult. Big, small, middle, the people love, support, and believe in the President."

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18. (SBU) Biographical Note: Safarov was born in Baljuvon (then a part of Danghara district) in 1947. He was a mid-level Communist Party official until 1991 and served as Communist Party Chairman of Baldzhuvan District. Safarov was elected to the Majlisi Namoyandagon in 1991. He was Chief of Presidential Apparatus from 2000 to 2001, then Ambassador to Russia from 2001 to 2007. He then was again elected to the Majlisi Namoyandagon in a 2007 special election, officially winning 92.7% of the vote and was First Deputy Speaker of Parliament 2007-2009. President Rahmon appointed him First Deputy Chairman of the PDPT in December, 2009.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Rahmon appointed Safarov, who hails from the President's home region of Danghara, as a reliable "yes man" to manage the ruling party. Though Safarov and the President have both promised free, fair, and transparent elections, Safarov's belief that the 2005 voter turnout was 97% reveals that he may lack understanding of what "free and fair" means. He promised that the PDPT would not use administrative resources to support party candidates, but his view that District Administrators should "ensure voter turnout" suggests that local officials again will play a role in influencing voting. His belief that politicians shouldn't "throw bricks" during debates is typical of a ruling culture that, above all else, calls citizens to support the President and his "national projects." Safarov's excuse that his party did not pass amendments to the election law is thin, at best. The PDPT rubber stamps laws the President considers important with minimal debate. END COMMENT  
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